DR. JOHNSON
A GREAT
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Birthplace of Dr. Johnson, Lichfield. *From an old Print.*

# DR. JOHNSON
## A GREAT ENGLISHMAN

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By CECIL HARMSWORTH

(An Address to the Johnson Society delivered at Lichfiield, 15th September, 1923)

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ONE SHILLING

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# DR. JOHNSON:
## A GREAT ENGLISHMAN.

ET me frankly admit that I was at first a little reluctant to accept your kind invitation to act as president of your society for the year 1923-1924. I had before me the names of my distinguished predecessors, and I had in mind the knowledge that I should be called upon to address a highly critical audience. Dr. Johnson entertained, as you know, a lofty opinion of the people of Lichfield. He claimed for them that they were "the most sober, decent people in England, the genteelest in proportion to their wealth," and that they spoke the purest English. He turned Boswell loose in Lichfield in order that he might "see for once real civility." I am trusting that the qualities of which your illustrious fellow-citizen boasted have proved hereditary in you, and I am confident that even if I have nothing very novel to say about him I shall be treated with genteelness and urbanity.

¶ Indeed, I can say nothing new of Dr. Johnson—nothing at least that would be new to a Lichfield audience. Is it necessary to try to say anything new about him? Is it not better just to gossip about him as we gossip about an old friend round a winter's fire, recalling his little acts of kindness, his bright sallies in conversation, his tricks of countenance and of manner, and even his amiable defects of character? We have all had such old family friends, and there is unfailing pleasure in the recollection of lovable little incidents connected with their memories, and in the telling again of the old jokes they made or that

were made about them. Now, Johnson is the old friend of everybody here, and of great numbers in the larger world outside. He is always a fit subject for half-an-hour's discursive talk. Nay, I expect that we Johnsonians would be well content to talk about him at any time for a longer period than that. For what figure in our history is there that is associated with so much wit, so many quaint incidents, so many oddities of appearance, speech and manner, and, again, with so many notable acts of unselfish benevolence? I think of him myself, not only as a friend, but as the typical Englishman, who, whatever bilious critics may say, is still the most highly respected figure in the world to-day.

¶I have only one qualification for speaking to you about Dr. Johnson, and that is my unbounded admiration for his genius, for his life, and for his character. You in Lichfield are not to be blamed if you regard yourselves as possessing a special property in Johnson; but it is not an absolute freehold. We outsiders have some sort of right in him, too, and we are in the majority. Ardent Johnsonians are to be found in multitudes, not only in the British Islands, but everywhere where the English language is spoken. I scarcely like to conjecture what Johnson would say if he could know that the finest private collection of Johnsoniana belongs to Mr. R. B. Adam, of Buffalo, and that Mr. A. Edward Newton, of Philadelphia, has made the most important recent contribution to Johnsonian literature. This is a play published a few months ago that brings in the Sage himself and his circle of illustrious friends; and I must add that in the matter of printing, paper and binding it is an example of book production that we in England do not often equal. As you know, Johnson used to attack the Americans with what Boswell calls "the intemperate vehemence of abuse." They have retorted by heaping coals of fire on his head. They are among his most devoted adherents, as anyone can prove for himself by glancing

through the visitors' book at his Birthplace or at the house in Gough Square in London.

¶I want to consider with you for a few minutes what it is in the achievements and in the personality of Dr. Johnson that compels this world-wide homage. It is not, surely, the quality of his writings. Can anyone, even in Lichfield, lay his hand on his heart and assert with any chance of being believed that he has read through and through the twelve or more substantial volumes that embody the results of Johnson's literary activities? Is any one of his works our favourite bedside book, or the one indispensable volume that we thrust into our suit case when we go on holiday? We read books about Dr. Johnson, but do we read the books that he wrote himself? "The Lives of the Poets," perhaps, and his two fine solemn poems in the style of Juvenal; but what about "Irene," "The Rambler," "The Idler," and the political tracts? Let us be candid, as all true Johnsonians ought to be. For every one student of Johnson's own writings there are hundreds—even thousands—of readers of Boswell's "Life." In the field of letters "the great Cham of literature" is eclipsed by his biographer. Both Johnson and Boswell wrote books about the famous tour in Scotland. Who is there that reads Johnson's narrative unless, indeed, from a sense of duty? Who does not read Boswell's account often, and always with renewed delight?

¶Yet, as a figure in our literary history, Johnson is first and Boswell nowhere. He was first in his day, in the most splendid assemblage of genius that ever came together in companionship in this or any other country. Edmund Burke, Edward Gibbon, David Garrick, Oliver Goldsmith, Joshua Reynolds, Richard Brinsley Sheridan, Charles James Fox, John Wesley, James Boswell—they may have had some reservations in their opinions of one another, but they had none in their estimate of Johnson. You remember how diffident some of them were in their appeal

to him about the proposed epitaph to Oliver Goldsmith. No autocratic monarch was ever approached by his ministers with more humble deference or with more anxious diplomacy. Nor did they withhold the element of flattery, of which Johnson was as fond as smaller men sometimes are. Whereas, they affirmed, his original draft of the inscription, "considered abstractedly, appears to be, for elegant composition and masterly style, in every respect worthy of the pen of its learned author," yet, they ventured to say, the character of Goldsmith as a poet "is perhaps not delineated with all the exactness which Dr. Johnson is capable of giving it." They added the request, in even more deferential terms, that he would write the epitaph in English rather than in Latin. This humble appeal they drafted in the form of a "round robin," so that their great master should not know which of them first put his signature to the compromising document. You remember the sequel. Sir Joshua Reynolds, as being perhaps the best beloved of all his friends, was commissioned to carry the "round robin" to Johnson, who, we are told, was pleased to receive it with much good humour. He would alter the epitaph, he said, as to the sense of it, in any manner the memorialists desired, "but he would never consent to disgrace the walls of Westminster Abbey with an English inscription."

¶ This is all very familiar to you, but I am far from apologising for reminding you of the incident. My purpose for the moment is to exhibit Johnson in the position of unchallenged pre-eminence that he occupied among the foremost men of his time.

¶ And he had also in those days his less famous admirers. There was, for instance, Mr. Bewley, the philosopher of Massingham, who desired Dr. Burney, who was about to visit Johnson, to bring back with him some memento of the great man. The well-known story is best told, I think, in the words of Fanny Burney:—"While awaiting the

appearance of his revered host," says Miss Burney, "Mr. Burney recollected a supplication from the philosopher of Massingham, to be indulged with some token, however trifling or common, of his friend's admission to the habitation of this great man. Vainly, however, Mr. Burney looked around the apartment for something that he might innoxiously purloin. Nothing but coarse and necessary furniture was in view, nothing portable—not even a wafer, the cover of a letter, or a split pen was to be caught; till at length he had the happiness to espy an old hearth broom in the chimney corner. From this, with hasty glee, he cut off a bristly wisp which he hurried into his pocket-book; and afterwards formally folded in silver paper and forwarded in a frank to Lord Orford for Mr. Bewley, by whom the burlesque offering was hailed with good-humoured acclamation and preserved through life."

¶ And there was the young and handsome countess who said to Boswell: "I should think that to be praised by Dr. Johnson would make one a fool for all one's life." Johnson, we do not need to be told, was mighty pleased with such a compliment from a pretty woman.

¶ Coming to our own day, we find Dr. Johnson occupying an equally high position in the esteem of his fellow countrymen. He is better known to us than he was to all but the most intimate among his personal friends, and he has an immensely wider public. It is 139 years since he died. We do not live under the spell of his literary fame; we do not, as I have been bold enough to suggest, even read his books. None of us has heard the tones of his thunderous voice, has been the willing or unwilling victim of his devastating wit, or has seen him rolling majestically down Fleet Street to Charing Cross. Yet he lives for us as does no other personage in the history of our race, and he is first in our hearts among all the illustrious figures of English literature. Why is this? It is not only because he has been the subject of the most perfect of all biographies. It is, I believe, be-

cause that biography portrays with matchless art one of the noblest characters that has adorned the annals of mankind.

¶ You may think that I am about to pronounce an undiscriminating panegyric on Dr. Johnson. I shall do nothing of the kind. I am aware of his faults—of his excesses at table, of his fierce irascibility, of his occasional brutality in argument, of his many illiberal prejudices and narrow bigotries. On one occasion at least—I do not remember any other—he behaved with downright injustice; in his treatment, I mean, of Mrs. Thrale when she married the Italian musician. I have always felt a little sore about that, and have wished to find on record somewhere some token of contrition on his part for a manifest wrong. His conduct in that instance was so much at variance with the magnanimity of his general character that I can well believe he repented of it and made amends in some fashion that has not been handed down for our edification.

¶ In truth, few men have started out on a career of almost exemplary virtue more heavily handicapped than was Samuel Johnson. How greatly he succeeded we all know. There were, indeed, in his case predispositions to error that are by no means general. There were the physical ailments from which he suffered throughout his life, and there was "the constitutional malady" which, as Boswell says, "darkened the brightness of his fancy and gave a gloomy cast to his whole course of thinking." Too many men of genius have, in like circumstances, taken refuge in the bottle. Johnson found himself going that way and beat down the temptation under his feet. From the middle period of his life until almost his last day he nourished his glorious wit on lemonade. Of the saints in the calendar there are many who have been exposed to more spectacular temptations; there is none who gained a more notable victory over self than did Samuel Johnson in this instance. And it is by no means the only one. None of us can ever forget the atonement he made in the Market Place of

Uttoxeter for an act of disobedience to his father. And there are the less serious occasions when he hastened to make amends for rudeness of speech or manner. "Dr. Goldsmith," he said on one occasion, "something passed to-day where you and I dined: I ask your pardon." On another occasion when he had been very angry with Boswell in the presence of strangers, he made the most generous amends. "Well, I am sorry for it," he said, when Boswell remonstrated with him: "I'll make it up to you in twenty different ways." This was all the handsomer in Boswell's case, because Boswell was capable of teasing him sometimes beyond endurance. It needs a certain largeness of soul to apologise for wrongs committed even when they are only to be classed among the lesser social offences, and I do not recall an instance when Johnson failed of his duty in this respect. To crass impertinence, his rejoinder was usually annihilating in its severity. Some unhappy wight once rallied him on his presence at the benefit of Mrs. Abington, a very celebrated actress of the time. "Why, sir, did you go to Mrs. Abington's benefit? Did you see?" Johnson: "No, sir." "Did you hear?" Johnson: "No, sir." "Why then did you go?" Johnson: "Because, sir, she is a favourite of the public: and when the public cares the thousandth part for you that it does for her, I will go to your benefit, too."

¶ Of Johnson's generosity in larger matters much has been written. I think that Goldsmith hit off most happily this side of his character. When, in early days, Boswell expressed to Goldsmith wonder at Johnson's kindness to a man of bad character, Goldsmith replied, "He is now become miserable and that insures the protection of Johnson." Again of Mr. Levett, the humble medical practitioner whom Johnson sheltered under his roof for so many years, Goldsmith said, "He is poor and honest, which is recommendation enough for Johnson." Or we may say of Johnson what he said of Levett—that he was "Of ev'ry friendless

name the friend." Everybody knows of his strange, quarrelsome household, where every member was dependent partly or wholly on his charity. Let me remind you of his own description of his domestic circle: "Williams hates everybody; Levett hates Desmoulins and does not love Williams; Desmoulins hates them both; Poll (Miss Carmichael) loves none of them." Yet, so unselfish was his beneficence that he would often tear himself away from the most brilliant society to spend an evening with his poor friends, lest they should feel neglected.

¶ Perhaps, however, the splendour of his benevolence was most nobly exhibited in the case of Dr. Dodd. He, as you are aware, was a fashionable divine who fell into dissolute ways and ended by committing the crime of forgery. He was sentenced to the gallows, and despite the indefatigable exertions of Johnson and other friends, he suffered the extreme penalty. Dr. Johnson had met him but once, many years before, but he spent the whole of his influence in his behalf, interceded with Ministers, and wrote for him the letter of petition to the King praying for the exercise of the prerogative of mercy. In concluding his last, beautiful letter to Dr. Dodd, Johnson said: "In requital for those well-intended offices, which you are pleased so emphatically to acknowledge, let me beg that you make in your devotions one petition for my eternal welfare." I do not know where you will find in history or in fiction a more exquisite example of practical charity coupled with humbleness of mind. Which of us would have asked such a one as Dr. Dodd for his prayers?

¶ In a cathedral city it is proper to dwell for a moment on Dr. Johnson's devotion to the Church of England, which, in all its history, has never had a more faithful son. "Mr. Seward saw him presented to the Archbishop of York, and describes his bow as such a studied elaboration of homage, such an extension of limb, such a flexion of body, as have seldom or never been equalled." This, mind

you, not on account of the Archbishop's social rank, but because of his exalted position in the Church. The same sort of respect, with the necessary graduations, was extended to clergymen of lower rank—even, we may be sure, to those whose sermons he wrote. It may be said, perhaps, that he put too high a value on the outward tokens of respect for religion exhibited by other people. Of one Dr. John Campbell, he said: "Campbell is a good man, a pious man. I am afraid he has not been in the inside of a church for many years, but he never passes a church without pulling off his hat." But he did not withhold his censure from clergymen when he felt it to be merited. Finding himself once in the presence of a number of clergymen, who, as Boswell puts it, "thought they should appear to advantage by assuming the lax jollity of men of the world," and who thought also that Johnson would be entertained by their conduct, "he sat grave and silent for some time. At last, turning to Beauclerk, he said, by no means in a whisper, 'This merriment of parsons is mighty offensive.'"

Always he was resolving to be more constant in his attendance at church on Sundays, and two days in the calendar, Good Friday and Easter Day, he was wont to observe with particular reverence. There are few passages in Boswell's "Life" more pleasant than those describing his observances on those days. "On the 9th of April (1773), being Good Friday," says Boswell, "I breakfasted with him on tea and crossbuns. . . . He carried me with him to the church of St. Clement Danes, where he had his seat: and his behaviour was, as I had imagined to myself, solemnly devout. . . . We went to church both in the morning and evening. In the interval between the two services we did not dine; but he read in the Greek New Testament and I turned over several of his books." On the Easter Sunday they attended service at St. Paul's, as was Johnson's invariable custom on that day. Boswell was invited to dine with Johnson at his house. "I generally have a meat-pie on

Sunday," said Johnson. "It is baked at a public oven, which is very properly allowed, because one man can attend it; and thus the advantage is obtained of not keeping servants from church to dress dinners." So careful was he of the convenience and of the spiritual welfare of others.

¶Of Johnson's most solemn and intimate religious observances I will not now speak. His "Prayers and Meditations" are among the most sincere and the most affecting in our language. It was wholly characteristic of him that he composed a special prayer on the occasion of his embarking on the second volume of the Dictionary, and that he took no important step in life without recourse to the same means of guidance and inspiration.

¶Let it not be denied, however, that Johnson's zeal for the Church and Church principles led him occasionally into those excesses of bigotry that are among the few blemishes on his character. He defended vigorously the action of the University of Oxford in expelling six Methodist students who would not desist "from publicly praying and exhorting." "Was it not hard, sir," asked Boswell, "to expel them, for I am told they were good beings?" Johnson replied, with one of those flashes of humour that redeemed so many of his harsh opinions, "I believe they might be good beings; but they were not fit to be in the University of Oxford. A cow is a very good animal in the field: but we turn her out of a garden." And there is the case of the young lady, Miss Harry, who turned Quaker. He had been fond of her, but he could now find no better language for her than that she was an "odious wench"; and when her friends sought to find excuses for her, he worked himself up, twice over, into a furious passion.

¶On the political side, he was, as you know, equally outrageous. He defined a Tory as "one who adheres to the ancient constitution of the State and the apostolical hierarchy of the Church of England," and he was unwilling in the abstract to tolerate the slightest departure from this

attitude. Yet he had many friends among Nonconformists and among those whom he loved to call "Whig dogs." You recollect how well he came to love even that dreadful Mr. John Wilkes. The fact is that his warm human nature was always getting the better of his religious and political prejudices. There was no old friend whom he valued more highly or more frequently visited than Dr. Taylor, of Ashbourne, who was as rabid almost in his Whiggism as Johnson was in his Toryism; and, if he hated Milton for being a Roundhead, he was the first to come to the assistance of Milton's grand-daughter.

¶I admit, however, I have not read anywhere that he ever forgave the Americans. It was unsafe even to mention them in his hearing!

¶And now I am going to state a seeming paradox. I believe that Johnson's very faults of character have served but to endear him to the multitude of his admirers throughout the world. There is a great deal of the old Adam in all of us, and I don't think we should have liked Johnson half as well if he had been as impeccable as he was always striving manfully to be. His faults seem to bring him nearer to us, for are we not also narrow and bigoted and unreasonable in many things? Well for us if, like Johnson, we try all our lives to fight down those prejudices and if we find it possible, as he could, to love people whose principles we detest.

¶While we are talking of Johnson's faults, it is well to remind ourselves that some of them existed only in his own too sensitive imagination. On how many occasions did he reproach himself for what he regarded as his besetting sin of idleness? "One day," as Sir John Hawkins records, "on seeing an old terrier asleep by the fireside at Streatham, he said, 'Presto, you are, if possible, a more lazy dog than I am.'" Again he once said of himself that "he always felt an inclination to do nothing." Whereupon Boswell justly observed that "it was strange to think that

the most indolent man in Britain had written the most laborious work, The English Dictionary." Open the Dictionary at random anywhere, and you must be impressed by the proofs of Johnson's huge industry and of his vast and versatile reading in literature. The definition of every important word is supported by one quotation at least, and sometimes by many, taken from the acknowledged masters of our language. Certain of the Elizabethans are, I should judge, the only great writers of English up to Johnson's time with whose work he was not perfectly familiar. Nor did he draw on the classic authors only. He once asked Garrick what people said of the Dictionary. Garrick told him that among the criticisms it was objected that he cited authorities which were beneath the dignity of such a work, mentioning Richardson the novelist. "Nay," said Johnson, "I have done worse than that: I have cited *thee*, David."

¶And apart from the Dictionary there are the twelve substantial volumes to which I have referred, and his edition of Shakespeare. We must add to these achievements his untiring mental activity in all that concerned human affairs. I have observed the same quality in each of the two or three really great men I have been privileged to meet. We can imagine that Shakespeare had the same insatiable relish for the details of human life; indeed, there is evidence of it in well-nigh every page of his immortal works. So it is that we find the indolent Johnson discussing eagerly with military officers the composition and properties of gunpowder; watching, with as keen interest as his imperfect eyesight would allow, the drilling and the equipment of soldiers; arguing with Dr. Taylor about the points of a bull-dog; or listening patiently to the tedious account, given by his old friend, Mr. Jackson, of Lichfield, of a new method of dressing leather. Nothing of human concern was indifferent or alien to him. I cannot forbear to remind you of a delicious illustration of this

truth. He once advised a young country clergyman to have, if possible, a good orchard. "He knew," he said, "a clergyman of small income who brought up a family very reputably, which he fed with apple-dumplings."

¶After all, as we now see more clearly than he could do, it was not Johnson's chief business in life to compile dictionaries, to edit Shakespeare, to write the lives of the poets, or even to overwhelm all comers in argument. It was, if I mistake not, to hold up to his own and to succeeding generations the example of a truth-telling, straight-dealing, God-fearing Englishman. This destiny he fulfilled to a marvel. I would have Samuel Johnson's life studied in every school in the kingdom. Not a small thing was it to dominate and to impregnate with his principles the literary world of his time. You recollect what Sir Joshua Reynolds said about his insistence on telling the truth in all, even in the minutest particulars of life. He said that all who were of Johnson's school were "distinguished for a love of truth and accuracy which they would not have possessed in the same degree if they had not been acquainted with Johnson." From his immediate circle his influence radiated far and wide, and radiates now in every part of the globe where English is spoken.

¶"Great and good heart!"—so poor Dr. Dodd addressed him from Newgate, on the eve of his own wretched and dishonourable death.

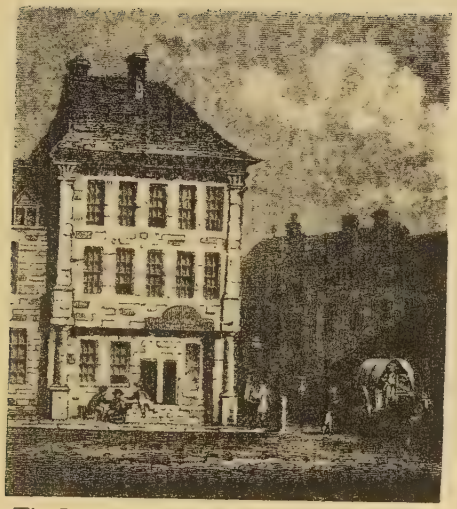
¶It would be impossible more aptly to summarise Samuel Johnson than in these few eloquent words. Great he truly was in respect of his immense intellectual gifts—greater still in the qualities of character that are so easily recognised and so difficult to define. He was not as profound a thinker as Burke or within any distance of Goldsmith as a writer. There were respects in which others of his illustrious friends—Gibbon, Sheridan, Fox, even Boswell—overtopped him. But he ruled among them, as we have seen, with unchallenged supremacy, and, genuine as is our

respect for all these names, we deny to each and every one of them the corner in our hearts that is reserved for Johnson. Tory, Liberal or Labour, Churchman or Nonconformist, whatever our opinions, whatever our outlook on the problems of life, we are all of one mind in this. Over an ever-widening gulf of years Samuel Johnson exercises an increasing influence, and becomes more and more the beloved friend of all who choose to acquaint themselves with the facts of his life. He wins us over not only by the wit that, as Garrick said, "shakes laughter out of you whether you will or no," but more by his plain honesty of speech and purpose, his flawless sincerity, his charity, his triumph against incredible odds in the battle of life, and by his conquest of self in that internal battle which each of us must wage for himself with such spiritual aids as he has the faith to summon to his assistance.

¶I cannot do better than conclude in the words of one of the "metaphysical" poets who was assuredly just after his own heart, though I do not find that he makes mention of him in his "Life of Cowley." George Herbert cannot have known anybody better deserving of his description of an honest man than was Samuel Johnson:—

"Who is the honest man?
He that doth still and strongly good pursue;
To God, his neighbour, and himself most true;
Whom neither force nor fawning can
Unpin or wrench from giving all their due.

"Whom none can work or woo
To use in anything a trick or sleight,
For above all things he hates deceit;
His words and works and fashion too,
All of a piece, and all are clear and straight."



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